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ABSTRACT

Changes that are taking place in the Volkshochschulen in the Federal Republic of Germany and others that are expected to result from a directive of the German Council for Education are based on a concept that continuing education should be part of the general system of education. Many problems are foreseen in relation to the way in which continuing education should be organized and defined and in relation to the types of services that will have to be offered by the Volkshochschulen. It is believed that the Volkshochschule will have to comprise a center for autodidactic studies, a national set of certificates with credit system, a program of differentiated working groups, and a forum for public discussion. The educational programs will not only consider stable matters but also relatively rapidly changing concepts. The forms of teaching used will also need to be defined more specifically. The organizational structure will need to place the Volkshochschule as a public institution for adult education. The locations of the new Volkshochschulen should be such that each person can reach an adult education center within 30 minutes; this means that, as a rule, Volkshochschulen will need to be established in all regional centers and provided with a permanent staff, with affiliated outposts if required. The financing of the Volkshochschulen is the task of both state and local authorities. Teacher training should be carried out in close cooperation with universities. (DB)

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DEUTSCHER VOLKSHOCHSCHUL-VERBAND E.V.

Can the Volkshochschulen of Today Answer the Requirements of Adult Education for Tomorrow?

by Helmuth Dolff, Bonn F.R.G.

For a relatively long time little consideration was given in the Federal Republic to a cause for which the Volkshochschulen had been fighting for decades, namely to integrate adult education into the general system of education on an equal footing with the so-called traditional sectors of school and university; that demand is now being reiterated for UNESCO, after the 2. World Conference on Adult Education in Montreal/Canada had made it its own as early as 1960.

Based on the traditionalist ideas of an educational system which subdivides life into a period of learning and another period in which one then applied what had once been learned, public opinion often gave to adult education the task of merely supplying later on in life what had been missed at school and of being a charming compliment of the general and more decorative cultural activities. This state of affairs was not changed either by the fact that the Volkshochschulen after the war began to make the teaching of civics, the education in democratic responsibility, or, as it has since come to be called, political education, one of their central and basic activities - thus gradually assuming cultural, educational, and social functions which had hardly anything to do with those misconceptions. At about the same time the problem of overcoming the traditional opposition between education and training began to be discussed, the alleged incompatibility of vocational training and so-called liberal education. Nevertheless, people became aware of these difficulties to the extent that the German Commission for Education tabled a comprehensive study on the "State and Mission of Adult Education in Germany", thus clearly initiating a re-examination of the problem. Another decade went by, however, before in 1970 the German Council for Education in its "Structural Plan for the Educational System" defined adult education - which was called somewhat abruptly continuing education - as part of the general system of education to which it was connected by a common organisational structure. In the meantime the Volkshochschulen had expanded their activities considerably in terms of quantity and in a number of subjects also in terms of quality; this extension was reflected by the growing organisational links with the local authorities and their regional associations. Side by side with these public agencies of adult education more and more institutions that were provided for by a number of private or social bodies began to conceive educational programmes which were based on the general mission of the respective group.

From the Structural Plan for the Educational System to the Report of the Federal Government on Education only a short step had to be made. The report reads - in a sort of first and rather vague directive:
"Continuing education is the fourth pillar of the general system of education. Everything is to be done to make the country realize that continuing education is a public responsibility, in the same way in which earlier forms of education are considered as such. This means that the fourth pillar shall

- be further developed,
- be protected by law,
- obtain guaranteed financial support,
- come up to high standards of quality,
- work in a systematic and co-ordinated way,
- be provided with qualified tutorial staff,
- give publicly-recognized certificates,

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- put before the public its co-ordinated and permanent share in the overall national programme of education,
- apply modern pedagogical methods and forms of work,
- be in a continuous process of reform and adaptation to evolving requirement;"

A concise abstract, which seems self-evident to the interested citizen, but which holds a host of problems behind this shortened summary. It is therefore hardly astonishing that both the Structural Plan and the Report on Education become vague and unspecific when they deal with the way in which continuing education is to be organized and defined as part of educational facilities for each citizen. This certainly is not only due to the fact that plans for a re-orientation of school and university can be developed on the basis of existing institutions in which the need for renewal became apparent, whereas adult education and its institutions by definition call for permanent change. Allowance must certainly be made in this field for a number of social and educational considerations and opinions which have long since been overcome for the sake of the matter in schools and universities. Not without purpose did the first draft of the Structural Plan in its chapter on continuing education explain in a footnote that in the text the term "continuing education", which had also been gaining ground in the Federal Republic, because adult education was being too widely associated with the Volkshochschulen by public opinion.

The growth of international contacts makes it necessary for people to be linguistically and mentally equipped for dealing with unfamiliar problems and people from other countries.

Free and democratic ways of life can be maintained and developed only if the persons representing them are well-informed, discriminating, and willing to take decisions.

In helping people to meet these requirements of society, adult education should also, as far as possible, help each person to satisfy his own individual wish to discover what he can do and how to act responsibly."

Can the more than 1.000 Volkshochschulen with their several millions of students in this light answer the requirements of adult education in the future? Are the efforts of the people who work in them, the subsidies of the state, and the intellectual commitment of the public sufficient to help the Volkshochschulen escape out of the permanent improvisation which exists in spite of organisational stability? At face value one would have to resign and say: No. But there are always two sides to each coin, and so we find here too prospects of getting closer to our aim by combining creative imagination and realistic planning. The Volkshochschulen will endeavour to assume their responsibilities in a rolling reform together with the other responsible bodies for adult education, in conjunction with its partners in the local authorities and with the support by the state.

To this topic a few quotations from a brochure on a "Model of Tomorrow's Volkshochschule". The underlying concept is based on the following assumptions: "The rapidly changing conditions of our environment, and not least of all our occupational commitments, make adult education more important in all fields of life.

The redistribution of educational tasks, which is now sought to be brought about by the renewal of the educational system, will have the same effect.

Continued learning will therefore become more natural for the adult.

An institution must be created whose general and public character will enable it to answer with its programmes the rising demands which will be made on it.

The Volkshochschulen have anticipated these needs in order to be able to assume this role in the future; a structure has to be found, however, which will not block the road for further developments.

Projects will therefore have to be made for the

- types of services rendered
- the programmes
- the organisational structure
- the (tutorial and administrative) staff
- the premises

As to the types of services which will have to be rendered by the Volkshochschulen along the lines of future educational conditions, the following consequences will have to be drawn: The Volkshochschule will have to comprise a centre for autodidactic studies, a national set of certificates with credit system, a programme of differentiated working groups, and a forum for public discussion.

The educational programmes will have to consider - apart from long-term developments - also relatively rapid changing interests. Recurring tensions between available and required knowledge and entirely new concepts and problems will have to be examined. The Volkshochschulen will also have to define more specifically their forms of teaching.

They will have to make clear what kind of participation will be expected and what students can expect of the Volkshochschulen. The organisational structure will have to mark the Volkshochschule off as a public institution for adult education from the comprehensive school and the comprehensive university; the one offering a syllabus for clearly defined basic and further education, and the other catering for the interests and needs of specific groups. Possibilities of co-operation with the mass media will have to be carefully studied by the Volkshochschulen in order to widen their range of programmes.

The problems of equal chances and the potential service area of a qualitatively sound and differentiated programme will have to be taken into account when the location of new Volkshochschulen is decided. Each person shall be in a position to reach a centre for adult education within 30 minutes; each centre requires the services of at least seven permanent staff members in order to safeguard the quality of its work. Spelled out in terms of regional planning this means that, as a rule, Volkshochschulen will have to be established in all regional centres, and be provided with a permanent staff. Outposts shall be affiliated to them where required. A co-ordination of these is necessary in order to guarantee a progressive and qualified continuation of studies even in cases in which one is no longer able to do so at the place one is living at.

There is need for further consolidation of the status of the Volkshochschulen as a legally independent public institution with its own administration and unhampered development under the legal control by the state and the local authorities.

The financing of the Volkshochschulen is the task of both state and local authorities and should be given stronger and more specific bases in the same way in which the law provided for other public educational institutions.

Curricula for training and university courses must be conceived in close co-operation with universities in order to meet the increasing demand for full-time tutors; without them all organisational, technical, and educational considerations become void. Only the full-time tutorial staff in a well organised Volkshochschule, which is adapted to regional conditions, is able to guarantee a programme of uniform quality. More efforts will have to be made in order to supply premises for the Volkshochschulen. These centres will necessarily have to be located at the focal points of regional and urban traffic. This will be the guarantee that the systematic programmes of the Volkshochschulen at least will be held under adequate conditions and concentrated at one location. This will not preclude a decentralized programme for suitable subject matters."

Parts of this model have been developed and tested here and there. Much, even most of it, remains to be done. The wealth of experiences which the Volkshochschulen gathered in the years since the last war will be the basis for our further work. Many a beloved tradition will have to fall by the wayside. But this loss might be made up for by the awareness of being able to do more justice to all groups and sections of our people, and to come closer to our chosen aim of serving all citizens of our country.

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